

Message Text

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FOLLOWING REPEAT DAMASCUS 0090 SENT ACTION SECSTATE INFO ABU
DHABI, ALGIERS, AMMAN, BEIRUT, CAIRO, JIDDA, KUWAIT, LONDON,
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GENEVA & USUN NEW YORK DATED 21 FEB 1974:

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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 0090

BEIRUT PASS BAGHDAD

KUWAIT PASS MUSCAT

GENEVA FOR MEPC DEL

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, SY

SUBJECT: ATMOSPHERICS ON THE EVE OF SECRETARY'S THIRD
TRIP TO DAMASCUS

REF: A. DAMASCUS 007 (NOTAL); B. DAMASCUS 002 (NOTAL)

1. SUMMARY: DESPITE REPORTS OF CONTINUED NEGATIVE
PRESSURES ON ASAD, I BELIEVE BASED ON INFORMATION FROM
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A VARIETY OF SOURCES, THAT HE HAS MADE HIS DECISION

TO GO TO GENEVA. THE BAATH PARTY HAS NOW REPORTEDLY GIVEN ITS ACQUIESCENCE AND THE POPULATION AT LARGE IS ALSO SAID TO BE IN FAVOR OF A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT, BUT NO SYRIAN IS PREPARED TO ACCEPT SUCH A SETTLEMENT AT ANY PRICE. WITH REGARD TO THE GOLAN AS WELL AS TO PALESTINIAN RIGHTS, ASAD WILL NOT BE ABLE TO COMPROMISE VERY MUCH, YET HE CAN NOW BEGIN A NEGOTIATING PROCESS WITH THE ISRAELIS INVOLVING INITIALLY AT LEAST A PARTIAL DISENGAGEMENT ON THE GOLAN. IN ADDITION, THE SARG IS REPORTEDLY TRYING TO GET THE PALESTINIANS TO AGREE TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A GOVERNMENT IN EXILE AND TO THE EVENTUAL CREATION OF A PALESTINIAN STATE CONSISTING OF THE WESTERN BANK AND GAZA. AT THE SAME TIME, REPORTS ARE HEARD OF IRAQI SUPPORTED OPPOSITION TO ASAD IN COOPERATION WITH PALESTINIAN EXTREMISTS LIKE THE PFLP AS WELL AS WITH SYRIAN HARDLINERS. RELATIONS, HOWEVER, BETWEEN ASAD AND SADAT ARE DESCRIBED AS EXCELLENT DESPITE SOME INDICATION OF CONTINUED SYRIAN SUSPICION OF EGYPTIAN INTENTIONS. ALTHOUGH POPULAR SUPPORT FOR ASAD IS SAID TO BE WIDESPREAD, THE SYRIAN ECONOMY IS NOT GOOD AND THIS MIGHT WORK AGAINST HIM. MEANWHILE, THE SOVIETS ARE REPORTED TO BE LOCALLY ENCOURAGING THE IDEA OF A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT BUT WITH A LARGER ROLE FOR THEMSELVES IN ACHIEVING IT. FINALLY, AMERICAN PRESTIGE IS HIGH IN SYRIA AFTER YEARS OF ABSENCE AND A GENUINE THAW IN SYRIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS HAS BEGUN. DEPENDING ON THE SECRETARY'S SUCCESS WITH DISENGAGEMENT, ALL SIGNS POINT TO A GOOD SPRING. END SUMMARY.

2. SINCE MY LAST CABLES (REFTELS) DESCRIBING THE LOCAL ATMOSPHERICS PRIOR TO THE SECRETARY'S SECOND VISIT IN MID-JANUARY, MUCH HAS HAPPENED IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND YET LOOKING AT THE SCENE FROM A DAMASCUS VANTAGE POINT, ONE MIGHT BE TEMPTED TO SAY LITTLE HAS CHANGED, AT LEAST NOT IN SYRIA. THUS, I STILL KEEP HEARING FROM A VARIETY OF SOURCES, BOTH FOREIGN AND LOCAL, THAT ASAD REMAINS UNDER SERIOUS INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL PRESSURES WHICH ARE ATTEMPTING TO PREVENT HIM FROM ENGAGING IN A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT WITH THE ISRAELIS. IN ADDITION, I CONTINUE TO GET STORIES WHICH ALLUDE TO SERIOUS DISSENT WITHIN SYRIAN RULING CIRCLES. THIS DISSENT IN TURN ALLEGEDLY MAKES IT DIFFICULT FOR ASAD TO MOVE AHEAD ON THE ROAD TO GENEVA. NONETHELESS, CONFIDENTIAL

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DEVELOPMENTS IN THE AREA, PARTICULARLY DISENGAGEMENT ON SCHEDULE ON THE EGYPTIAN-ISRAELI FRONT AND GROWING ARAB CONFIDENCE IN THE USG, ARE PRODUCING COUNTERVAILING PRESSURES ON ASAD WHO WITH CAUTION AND PATIENCE IS, ACCORDING TO MY SOURCES, PRESSING AHEAD SLOWLY BUT SURELY ON A LINE CLEARLY TOWARDS GENEVA. (THE FOREIGN MINISTRY IS AGAIN REPORTEDLY READYING ITS TEAM FOR SYRIAN PARTICIPATION AT THESE TALKS.)

3. OVER THE LAST WEEK OR SO I HAVE TALKED TO A FAIR NUMBER OF DIPLOMATS, LOCAL AND FOREIGN NEWSPAPER PEOPLE, AS WELL AS TO SEVERAL KNOWLEDGEABLE DAMASCENES. ALL AGREE THAT ASAD HAS LONG SINCE DECIDED TO GO TO GENEVA WITH ONLY THE MATTER OF TIMING TO BE DECIDED. MOREOVER, THESE SOURCES REPORT THAT WITHIN THE LAST TEN DAYS OR SO ASAD HAS MANAGED AFTER MUCH DEBATE TO OBTAIN AGREEMENT TO HIS DECISION FROM THE LEADERSHIP OF THE SYRIAN BAAATH PARTY TO (A) ENGAGE IN NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE ISRAELIS THROUGH SECRETARY KISSINGER ON THE MATTER OF A GOLAN DISENGAGEMENT AND (B) GO TO GENEVA ONCE THAT DISENGAGEMENT IS REALIZED. AT THE SAME TIME, I HAVE HEARD THAT AS A COROLLARY TO THE ABOVE, ASAD HAS ALSO OBTAINED ACQUIESCENCE FROM THE LOCAL BAAATH LEADERSHIP TO AGREE TO THE LIFTING OF THE OIL BOYCOTT AGAINST THE US ONCE DISENGAGEMENT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED. THIS PARTY APPROVAL, I HAVE BEEN TOLD, WAS NOT EASY TO COME BY AND GOLDA MER'S RECENT STATEMENTS RE THE GOLAN DID NOT HELP MUCH.

4. IN CONNECTION WITH DISENGAGEMENT, SEVERAL SOURCES REPORT THAT ASAD IS HOPING TO REGAIN CONTROL OF KUNITRA EITHER AS PART OF AN INITIAL DEAL ON THE GOLAN OR AS PART OF AN EARLY SUBSEQUENT PHASE. THESE SOURCES STATE THAT KUNITRA, LIKE PORT SUEZ, HAS BECOME AN EMOTIONAL NATIONALIST ISSUE IN SYRIA AND THAT ASAD COULD PRESENT THE "LIBERATION OF KUNITRA" AS A MAJOR DIPLOMATIC VICTORY, CANCELING OUT THE SECOND LOSS OF KUNITRA BY SYRIAN TROOPS WHICH OCCURRED DURING THE OCTOBER WAR. MOREOVER, ASAD'S REGAINING OF KUNITRA BY MEANS OF NEGOTIATION WOULD FURTHER WEAKEN THE EXTREMISTS AND THE HAWKS WHO HAVE BEEN PRESSING HIM SO HARD. I HAVE NO WAY OF KNOWING, WHETHER THIS IRREDENTIST FEELING

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ABOUT KUNITRA IS ACTUALLY SHARED BY THE INNERMOST CIRCLES AROUND ASAD, BUT HAVE HEARD FROM ENOUGH OF MY CONTACTS TO KNOW THAT KUNITRA IS ON THE MIND OF MANY A SYRIAN. CERTAINLY THE MATTER OF THE GOLAN REFUGEES IS A REAL ISSUE HERE AND THERE IS SCANT UNDERSTANDING FOR ISRAELI INSISTENCE ON THE PRISONER LIST WHILE ISRAEL REFUSES TO ALLOW SYRIAN VILLAGERS TO RETURN TO THEIR HOMES AND ADDING INSULT TO INJURY, ANNOUNCES PLANS FOR NEW GOLAN SETTLEMENTS.

5. THE LOCAL BAAATH PARTY HAS ALSO ALLEGEDLY MADE IT CLEAR TO ASAD THAT SYRIA MUST CONTINUE TO STRUGGLE FOR "THE RIGHTS OF THE PALESTINIANS." WHILE IT IS DIFFICULT TO OBTAIN ANY CLEAR IDEA FROM ANYBODY OF WHAT THIS MEANS, I HAVE BEEN TOLD THAT DURING THE RECENT PLO MEETING HERE IN DAMASCUS, THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT WAS STRONGLY SUPPORTING

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